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Qualities of Light: Stan Brakhage and the Continuing Pursuit of Vision Paul Arthur

The following article coincided with a 1995 Stan Brakhage retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It first appeared in a longer form in Film Comment magazine, Sep/Oct 1995.

Quick, name the artist who has created more individual films—admitting the vagaries and dubious worth of such a yardstick—than any filmmaker at least since the coming of sound. Here's a hint: regardless of how you count, he has doubtlessly pieced together more *images* than anyone in the history of the medium. The answer is Stan Brakhage, doyen of the American avant-garde and, this autumn, the subject of a twenty-year retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. In more than forty years of constant creative labor in the half-light of cultural marginality, he has produced nearly 270 separate films as well as five idiosyncratic books on film history and theory (often taking the form of letters and public lectures), and encouraged, through formal teaching and informal correspondence, a sizable number of young filmmakers. Moreover, following the example of Maya Deren, he made substantial contributions in the 1960s to the development of an institutional framework for the distribution and exhibition of avant-garde work.

Yet for all the intensity and effectiveness of his public engagement, Brakhage and his monumental body of films are defiantly, almost singularly self-enclosed. The inextricable dynamics of his life and aesthetic achievement—as a maker of “home movies” centered on his wife and five children, an *amateur* in the original sense—are philosophically and psychically isolated from mass society. This stance was strikingly emblemized by the 19th century log cabin in the Colorado mountains where a major portion of his work was composed. Now, at 62, spending most of his time in Canada with his second wife and new child—and still completing four or five films a year—he continues to thrive on the paradoxes and contradictions that sustained his early career. He is, for better or worse, among the last remnants of a great Romantic tradition in art whose overarching quest has been the fusion of nature and consciousness, the inscription and re-presentation through vision of what is simply and phenomenally present. The poet Robert Kelly once stamped his art as “mind at the mercy of eye, at last.”

Given Brakhage's massive output and the cloistered circumstances under which the films are produced and consumed, even a cursory attempt to summarize the trajectory, much less locate the quiddity, of his practice would be a hollow exercise. It is a territory whose dense folds and outcroppings refuse any unified critical perspective. Indeed, certain films,

including the aptly titled *The Art of Vision* (1965), instruct us on the reductive triviality of just such an impulse.

Nonetheless, through skimming lightly over the surface, a few rudimentary touchstones become visible. Among them is the compulsion toward a nearly totalized exploration of the cinematic apparatus. Although the bulk of his films have been made in 16mm, Brakhage has negotiated every available technical format from regular- and Super-8mm to 70mm IMAX (for a recent set of handpainted abstractions). The temporal scale of his creativity has ranged from eight seconds (*Eye Myth*, 1967) to four-and-a-half hours. And despite renouncing sound in the mid-Sixties as a distraction and impediment to an avowed “adventure in perception”—which, like other proscriptions such as the use of actors, he has since reconsidered—*Fire of Waters* (1965) and *Kindering* (1987) are among a handful of exquisitely vibrant sound-image conjunctions.

A consistent organizing principle has been the use of cycles, thematized in specific imagery and mirrored in interfilmic structures. Some of the longer works are divided into four or more detachable sections, and he completed a number of multi-film series, including *30 Songs* (1964-69) and the *19 Arabic Numerals* (1980-81). His 17-year autobiographical project “The Book of Film” consists of some fourteen films under at least four generic subtitles.

Disgruntled from the start with what he felt were excessive restrictions to the arsenal of conventional film language, he has investigated the expressive possibilities of handheld camera movement, exposure, superimposition, focus, synthetic editing, and the physical manipulation of the filmstrip. (Along with painting, he has scratched, dyed, baked, and otherwise directly intervened on the “sovereignty” of the photographic.) To be sure, formal innovation is never for its own sake, but always at the service of engendering in the viewer various states of perceptual experience. To this end he has lent his energies to fashioning dreams and nightmares, fantasies and memories, “closed-eye vision” (what is seen when we press our fingers to our lowered lids), hypnogagic images (the numinous state between waking and sleep), and, perhaps most spectacularly, the imagined vision of infants, children, animals, and insects.

Whatever slim “prestige” Brakhage has garnered in academic film study and, for that matter, in the culture at large is attributable in part to the inclusion of several early and quite disparate works in museum collections, textbook surveys, and course curricula. *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) is a graphic, sharply edited paean to childbirth that mobilizes skeins of metaphoric association between Brakhage’s pregnant wife Jane, domestic spaces, and natural or cosmic elements. The feature-length *Dog Star Man* (1961-64), safely ensconced in the National Film Registry, reprises and extends the eschatological core of Brakhage’s concerns—as he put it at the time, “birth, death, sex, and the search for God”—in a four part “mythopoetic” cascade of superimposed imagery with which seasonal changes are merged with the microrhythms of a central figure (the filmmaker) and celestial bodies.

Unfortunately, the deserved circulation of these and other examples of poetic filmmaking—notably, the fluttering *Mothlight* (1963), made by gluing tiny leaves, moth wings, and crystals directly onto Mylar tape—can easily obscure the larger compass of styles and genres he has embraced. Along with acted psychodramas from the Fifties, Brakhage has ventured into *cinéma vérité* documentary in “The Pittsburgh Trilogy” (1971), the portrait film (including one commissioned by the then-governor of Colorado), landscape studies, filmed theater, and found footage and collage drawn from and addressed to the numbing perversities of television.

There are, to be sure, a host of dissonant strands and anomalies in this complex fabric. Sporadic commercial projects for various agencies, including TV ads and public service tracts, constitute a “technical school” and source of income but remain outside the oeuvre. For such a radical individualist, dedicated to all shape and manner of the “personal” in cinema, he has participated in various types of collaboration. Even at the obsessional height of shooting his family’s dynamic interactions, he maintained that the scratched-in signature to his films, “by Brakhage,” stood for the combined efforts of himself, Jane, and the kids. *The Wonder Ring* (1955) was made at the request of Joseph Cornell, the extraordinary assemblage artist and a great filmmaker in his own right, who laid claim to the finished product by running it backwards and upside down with the titles *Gnir Rednow*. And in 1994, Brakhage worked with Phil Solomon, a master of lush, optically printed elegies, on a complicated program of re-articulating handpainted strips through variations in printing and editing; *Elementary Phrases* has the mesmerizing rhythmic and tonal affect of baroque musical composition.

The reference here to handpainting is salient because it hints at the way nothing is ever lost in the ebb and flow of Brakhage’s career. A particular film will seem to an ardent follower to constitute the “last word,” the ultimate expression of a theme or technique—the impulse toward abstraction, in *Text of Light* (1974), or the simulation of animal vision, in *The Weir Falcon Saga* (1970)—which then disappears from his repertoire for a few years, only to resurface in an unfamiliar context or within a new visual problematic. This ability to constantly reinvent himself in and through film—a process applicable to the American avant-garde movement as a whole—is driven by a hyper-attention to the dailiness of his own life experience and, ironically, gains sustenance from a strident indifference to changes in form and focus within the ranks of his avant-garde colleagues, and within the broader precincts of commercial cinema.

Not surprisingly, Brakhage has often railed against the emptiness of the entertainment industry, which he sees less as an oppositional term to the experimental than as a distinctly different realm of filmic creation. Yet although the commercial sphere is cordoned off, he is a dedicated student of film history, as evidenced by his book on canonical directors, *Film Biographies*. Nor has the beacon of light cast by Brakhage over the beleaguered avant-garde community always been so rosy. He has on many occasions found himself a solitary voice decrying the advent of an influential new film or stylistic evolution. He was decidedly hostile to Warhol’s early long-take exercises in minimalist narrative, films such as *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964), which had a cataclysmic impact on the direction of avant-garde aesthetics. Several years later he spoke against the burgeoning tendencies of so-called Structural projects, including Michael Snow’s *The Central Region* (1971), whose anti-subjective protocols and mathematically ordered “script” violated his commitment to spontaneous apperception of the world as filtered by the imagination.

In truth, Brakhage has frequently been confected by a younger generation as the disavowed pole in an aesthetic-political binary. In the Seventies, his thematics of family life and insistence on the need for visual mastery came to be read (and misread) by feminists as a last-ditch preserve of patriarchal privilege and authority. More recently, his general eschewal of postmodern deconstruction strategies, especially the “critical” appropriation and recontextualization of mass-cultural signs and artifacts, has again positioned him in an antithetical role. There is some justice in these appraisals, but they mask both the institutional politics of both funding and publicity and the more subtle contradictions and self-abnegations contained in his best work.

Take the issue of the status of “language” in cinematic expression. From the beginning

Brakhage has been a staunch enemy of the way language-based social conditioning corrupts the processes of direct seeing. In what is undoubtedly his most famous dictum, from the opening of his 1963 book *Metaphors on Vision*. Brakhage beckons us to “imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to a baby unaware of ‘Green’? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?...Imagine a world before ‘the beginning was the word.’”

The problem, he feels, is that we automatically “translate” the referents in the photographic images into their symbolic signs. But by short-circuiting or retarding this ‘natural’ operation—by, say, presenting the baby or field in soft focus or underexposure, or by rapidly panning over the scene—he can induce in the viewer a more direct encounter with the image as color, shape, movement, or texture. That is, we might suspend our desire to label or even misrecognize the object in front of us, and by so doing come to a fuller appreciation of qualities normally “unseen.”

In another passage he laments the limitations on the “slow-eyed viewer” whose perceptual organs can nonetheless be retrained in the course of discovering a hidden universe of meaning and sensation. Even in a relatively straightforward film such as *The Wonder Ring*, a brief tour of an elevated subway line in New York just prior to its demolition. Brakhage directs our attention to myriad shapes and tones of light as they enter the moving car. The technique in this case is less to destabilize our patterns of recognition than to redirect vision into areas we would ordinarily ignore. Rather than just record the old cars and passing architecture, he captures a jiggling play of superimposed planes of space as they reflect off the surfaces of dirt-streaked windows. The result is at once a medley of rhythmic shapes *and* a precise evocation of a patch of urban landscape at a particular historical moment.

The disruption of learned, conventional paradigms of cinematic perception serves another important function. With the naming process neutralized or hollowed out, the photographed object lends itself more easily to metaphoric association. For example, in his latest feature-length odyssey *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* (1991), by showing sparkles of light on the crests of rolling waves in an unusually dark exposure, he allows them to take on the appearance of swirling stars in a night sky. Similarly, shapes made by light in a diffusion lens resemble the flowers of a previous shot. Thus the settings of a garden and ocean are exfoliated as a magical domain in which light can “bloom,” water suddenly transforms into a solid or gaseous state, sea and sky reverse their coordinates.

The powers of visual connection alluded to here are in some degree what used to be implied by the term “poetic cinema.” It is a telling paradox that, for all his rejection of “Society with a capital S,” he is heavily indebted to the ideology and tactics of modernist poetry. As David James asserts in his magisterial study of Sixties alternative film movements, *Allegories of Cinema*, Brakhage’s writing as well as his filmmaking gains impetus from the models of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Robert Creeley, and especially Charles Olson. In one register Brakhage could say of *The Riddle of Lumen* (1972) that he intended to pose a classical riddle but “as distinct from language as I could make it,” while in another he takes inspiration from and pays tribute to literary sources ranging from Dante to cult novelist Marguerite Young...

For Brakhage the adventure in perception is infinitely renewable. As David James remarks, he has made filmmaking the agency of his being; bridging the aesthetic and the

existential, it is at once his “vocation and avocation, his work and play, his joy and terror—as integral as breathing.” As viewers we may be buoyant in the knowledge that he has many journeys left to take.

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Before the Beginning Was the Word: Stan Brakhage's "Untutored" Images Paul Arthur

Viewers encountering a Brakhage film for the first time often find the experience daunting and more than a little puzzling. A major obstacle to appreciation or understanding is the visual approach by which Brakhage renders images of things and places at the edge of recognizability. It is not that a particular image is perceived as abstract—although a number of his films, or parts of films, are decidedly non-representational—but that our ability to easily and comprehensively order what we see into fixed semantic categories seems short-circuited. Thus familiar, conventional ways of processing movie images—automatically labeling or “naming” their contents before moving on to putatively more complex cognitive tasks elicited by fictional narratives—are at once slowed and deflected onto other types of mental operations. For instance, near the middle of *Prelude: Dog Star Man* (1961) we see a brief close-up of brown animal fur, either that of a dog or, more likely, a cat. The hesitation in placing, as it were, a frame around this image, giving it some prescribed context, forces us to refocus attention towards less obvious qualities of “fur-ness”—texture, length, color, movement—instead of neatly consigning the bearer of fur to a realm of domesticated (in both senses) animal meaning. In other words, in Brakhage films we enter into momentary perceptual transactions in which we trade unhindered assimilation of images for intensified contact with pictorial or sensory features that might otherwise go unnoticed. At the same time we register the contours of a distinct subjectivity that regards the world-through-the-camera in an idiosyncratic, frequently revealing manner.

The process described here is part of what Brakhage referred to in his 1963 writings on film aesthetics, *Metaphors on Vision*, as an “adventure in perception.” In his best-known pronouncement, he summons the movie viewer to “imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective...How many colors are there in a field of grass to a baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?” Although he readily admits that any actual return to a state of “innocent,” childlike vision is impossible, the persistent project throughout his vast oeuvre has been to guide the eye in a journey of “untutoring,” using every possible cinematic tool as leverage for that journey. Prominent techniques contributing to the defamiliarizing of images include superimposition (which can confuse the shape or integral boundaries of things), very bright or very dim exposures, softened focus, odd angles, filters, spatial distortions caused by shooting with an anamorphic lens, rapid hand-held camera movements, unusually tight framing, and absence of synchronous sound. These practices tend to appear not singly but in various combinations, their effects are heightened by consistent strategies of fast editing or

montage. That is, even if we could fix the species of animal whose fur is displayed in extreme, soft-edged close-up, the brevity of such a shot would make identification practically moot. Favoring shallow compositions over images shot in depth, Brakhage additionally forces us to process the contents of his radically non-dramatic films minus the wider spatial perspectives we rely on—in conventional movies as well as daily life—to connect objects or details in a natural landscape to a wider field of apprehension. For instance, seeing a field of bright flowers near a rugged mountain cabin gives us various cues for how to regard the flowers themselves. Brakhage intends to strip our responses so we can see, say, the flowers without the iconographic baggage of countless prior representations of related "pastoral" scenes.

There are (at least) two important consequences of this approach to photographic imaging. First is the creation of a visual experience in which language does not hold sovereign power: "Imagine a world 'before the beginning was the word.'" Film theorists in the 1970s, taking their lead from linguistic theory and the psychoanalytic discourse of Jacques Lacan, posited that as we watch movies we sub-vocalize appropriate words to fit what we see and that, further, the syntax and grammar of conventional film is organized into strict, coded patterns of articulation. Such language-based theories were controversial and, significantly, had to bypass the workings of avant-garde and other marginal movements in order to appear coherent. A Brakhage film like *Cat's Cradle* (1959) does not entirely suppress our recourse to naming but rather floods our typical eye-brain loop with stimuli for which attached language cues are either less than automatic or, in cases of purely sensory appeal, non-existent. Implicitly refusing the longstanding separation of mind and body, reason and affect, proposed by philosophers since Descartes as the basis of the self-conscious ego, Brakhage's films and writings celebrate an aesthetics grounded in finely-calibrated subjective feelings. At the heart of his system is the concept of "moving visual thinking," the expression of ideas in forms that are inseparable from emotive responses. That is, our ability to think is an integral function of so-called bodily realms of emotion.

A second consequence of Brakhage's uniquely expressive style is to open, or more accurately re-open, a given image to associative or metaphoric connection with a subsequent image. It might sound paradoxical but as pictures are detached from their fixed standing in a realistic milieu, possibilities of sparking fresh meanings become enhanced. For example, in *Prelude*—in fact throughout *Dog Star Man*—human and animal body images are fused by editing and other visual parallels with properties of landscape, natural elements, and celestial forms. A woman's crotch is juxtaposed with the roots of a tree, an undulating flame paired with an anamorphically-elongated shot of a nude woman, the movement of clouds compared with the capillary action of blood, a shaggy dog placed next to a shot of the bearded film-maker. The sinuous barrage of poetic exchanges and transformations ventured in the course of this film—male and female, animal and human, body and landscape, macro- and microcosmic—fosters a dreamlike nimbus of ambiguity (in notes to the film, Brakhage cites the structure of dreams as one source of inspiration). Despite the highly pleasurable activity of making formal or ideational matches between disparate shots, the viewer may nonetheless experience confusion over how to arrange the headlong couplings into larger frameworks of significance. Indeed, it can be argued that the genuinely exciting effort to recenter our perceptions around moment-to-moment appreciation of phenomenal image qualities does not necessarily lend itself to longer skeins of evolving action, the translation of poetic synapses into quasi-narrative trajectories of meaning; in other words, in Brakhage's longer films, the issue of overarching theme seems to challenge his narrow focus on immediacy. Thus if aspects of *Dog Star Man* remind us of a dream-state, is there a continuous logic or idea under which the metaphors can be grouped? Regardless of how individual viewers choose to answer this question, what is undeniable is the degree to

which Brakhage is able to mobilize cinema to inscribe not just the visual flow of imagination but the principles by which that imagination has come to know itself. At its best, the experience of a Brakhage film allows us access to a powerful framework of self-knowledge. As the great director-theorist Sergei Eisenstein proclaimed, referring to the glories of montage editing: "The spectator not only sees the represented elements of the finished work, but also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and assembly of the image as it was experienced by the author." The same might be said of Brakhage's formal approach, with the caveat that our responses to a given work are likely to be both personalized and quite disparate in nature.

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Seeing Absence: Traversing The Documentary Phantasy by The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes

Louis Schwartz

Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971) focuses the relations between documentary and phantasy into a limit experience. The series of autopsies in a Pittsburgh morgue is nearly unmatched, even for audiences accustomed a contemporary audio-visual context saturated with violence. *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* is a difficult film to bear because it depicts cadavers without promoting the formation of a phantasy with which to screen them. The formal structure of Brakhage's film actually inhibits the production of phantasy.

Paratextually, *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* presents itself as a documentary. It is one of three documentaries Brakhage made about Pittsburgh in the early 1970s. Its amphibological title can be understood as referring to either sight as a authenticity's privileged sense, or to the experience of sight as authenticity itself. In either case the truth of the film's images is invoked. Brakhage's film embodies the primordial documentary impulse to show its audience something actual. It does not go beyond that impulse. *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* depicts corpses without explaining them or containing them within a narrative. The film does not invoke scientific discourses about the dead bodies. The

image is left raw.

My paper reads Brakhage's film along with Jacques Lacan's lectures on "The Gaze as a" to show how it counteracts phantasy. Unlike most documentaries *The Act Of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* is framed and cut in such a way as to constantly return audiences to an awareness of looking at the film's images. By constantly throwing the spectator back on to the experience of spectating the film does not give its audience the time of phantasy.

Like *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* André Bazin's essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" works the themes of death and plastic representation. In light of Bazin's demonstration that photography is the realization of the drive to defeat death through the endurance of the image, the above analysis of Brakhage's film suggests that the film is an example of pure cinema. In depicting the corpse the camera is enacting its essence. This reminder of the essence of cinema presented as the trace of an encounter with the real itself blocks the production of phantasy.

The themes of the corpse and the image are also developed in Maurice Blanchot's "Two Versions of the Imaginary." Blanchot's essay argues that "The cadaver is its own image" because both the cadaver and the image continue to "affirm things in their disappearance." By making a film which depicts the cadaver Brakhage creates a sort of *mise-en-abyme*, an image of an image.

The *mise-en-abyme* of Brakhage's film divides the image in such a way that it has no unitary trait and cannot serve as an imaginary mirror in which a spectatorial subject finds the mirage of its unity reflected. In the so called classical documentary the unitary trait is granted by the film's narration. In the absence of that or any other structure capable of suturing subject, the vision that the film throw us back onto is fragmentary. Without the a the film cannot serve as the locus of fantasy.

o available in a [Spanish translation](#).

Naming, and Defining, Avant-Garde or Experimental Film

By Fred Camper

About naming, no one has ever come up with a satisfying name for the body of work that

includes *Ballet mécanique*, *Un Chien Andalou*, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, [Dog Star Man](#), *The Chelsea Girls*, *Quick Billy*, *Serene Velocity*, *Zorns Lemma*, and *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, to say nothing of all sorts of more recent work by filmmakers such as [Su Friedrich](#), [Janie Geiser](#), [Louis Klahr](#), [Brian Frye](#), and others. I'd like to think the lack of a stable name is a sign of the movement's health. I mean, to take off on Gertrude Stein's famous remark to the effect that a museum can't also be "modern," if you know exactly what avant-garde film is and how to name it, it probably isn't very "avant-garde," right?

When the North American branch of the movement first burst onto public consciousness in the mid-1960s, and naming became a real issue, various filmmakers expressed discontent with the names in use; some had expressed such discontent even earlier. [Stan Brakhage](#) said the appellation "avant-garde" was too European. Someone, I can't remember who (I'd like to think it was Peter Kubelka, but I'm not sure), said, of "experimental," something like, "I made many experiments in the process of making this film. I left them all in my editing room. What you've seen is not an experiment, but a completed work. (Another problem with "experimental": at the MIT Film Society, where I showed "experimental" films from 1965-71, a couple MIT students once showed up thinking they were going to see films of science experiments! But then, we also had to give a refund to two nursing students who were not expecting an auteurist classic when they bought tickets for a program listed as "Bringing Up Baby — Andrew Sarris will speak.") "Underground" was critiqued from various angles, such as also having inappropriate European echoes, and I think Brakhage may have mentioned the fact that he lived 9,000 feet above sea level in a humorous rebuke to the claim that he was an "underground" filmmaker. "Independent" quickly ran into the problem that, in the Hollywood nomenclature of the time, Disney was an "independent" studio, and now too it tends to mean narrative features not produced by a major studio but with budgets of many millions. "New American Cinema" had some currency for a while, but it also included narrative features, and today it can also mean Hollywood. The then-editor of *Canyon Cinema News*, Emory Menefee, proposed "undependent," in the sense of not being dependent on anything, but that never made it into general use either. Presently I try to use "avant-garde," "experimental," and "a-g" all in the same piece of writing, as a way of naming a category of films while also indicating that naming is still problem.

So then, what characteristics might be said to be held in common among the films I've listed above and other similar works? Obviously there is no hard-and-fast algorithm for deciding what is or is not an avant-garde or experimental film, and there can be lots of "is it or isn't it" debates at the margins. But I think no sensible person would deny the appellation to [Christopher Maclaine's *The End*](#) or Bruce Baillie's *Quixote*, nor try to apply it to *Gone With the Wind* or *E.T.*

To decide the obvious cases, and help clarify what characteristics are shared in such work, I would instead offer a list of qualities, a six-part "test," as it were. Many avant-garde films will fail one or two of these, but I think that a film that most on this list would agree is "avant-garde" or "experimental" will pass most of them.

1. It is created by one person, or occasionally a small group collectively, working on a minuscule budget most often provided out of the filmmaker's own pocket or through small grants, and is made out of personal passion, and in the belief that public success and profit is very unlikely. "Minuscule budget" means something very different from what the phrase might mean in theatrical narrative filmmaking; here it refers to a figure in the hundreds, or thousands, or in rare cases tens of thousands of dollars.

2. It eschews the production-line model by which the various functions of filmmaker are divided among different individuals and groups: the filmmaker is the producer, director,

scriptwriter, director of photography, cameraperson, editor, sound recordist, and sound editor, or performs at least half of those functions.

3. It does not try offer a linear story that unfolds in the theatrical space of mainstream narrative. [The hypertrophic counter-example that proves the rule here is [Hollis Frampton's *Poetic Justice*](#), which does tell a "linear story" — but the viewer receives that story by reading hand-printed script pages that are piled one after another on a table, not by seeing the script's story enacted on screen.]

4. It makes conscious use of the materials of cinema in a way that calls attention to the medium, and does not do so in scenes bracketed by others in a more realistic mode that would isolate the "experimental" scenes as dream or fantasy sequences. [Examples: scratching or painting directly on the film strip; cutting rapidly and unpredictably enough that the editing calls attention to itself; the use of out of focus and "under" or "over" exposure; extremely rapid camera movements that blur the image; distorting lenses; extreme tilts of the camera; placing objects in front of the lens to alter the image; time lapse photography; collaging objects directly onto the film strip; the use of other abstracting devices such as superimpositions or optical effects; printed titles that offer a commentary that's different from simply providing information or advancing the narrative; asynchronous sound; the cutting together of spatially disjunct images in a way that does not serve an obvious narrative or easily reducible symbolic purpose. I can think of at least one filmmaker — Brakhage — who has done all of these.]

5. It has an oppositional relationship to both the stylistic characteristics of mass media and the value systems of mainstream culture. [Thus in a found footage film using footage from instructional films, the original will be reedited to create some form of critique of the style and meaning of the originals.]

6. It doesn't offer a clear, univalent "message." More than mainstream films, it is fraught with conscious ambiguities, encourages multiple interpretations, and marshals paradoxical and contradictory techniques and subject-matter to create a work that requires the active participation of the viewer.

Without ranging through the whole history of the mode, many landmark films seem to me to meet all of the criteria above, from *Meshes of the Afternoon* to *Fireworks* to *Twice a Man* to [Mothlight](#) to *Wavelength* to [La Raison Avant La Passion \(Reason Over Passion\)](#). I don't propose any mechanical method whereby meeting, say, five of the six automatically qualifies a film, but rather suggest that considering these characteristics might be useful in thinking about this body of work.